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ABSTRACT

This investigation surveyed 505 parents of elementary school students enrolled in the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Public School District regarding the characteristics of a "best teacher." Approximately 50 percent of the parent responses were from minority parents (35.6 percent African American, 10.6 percent Hispanic, 2.4 percent Native American, and .8 percent Asian American). In general, the "best teacher" was identified as a female. Except for Native American parents, the "best teacher" was identified as belonging to the same ethnic/racial group as the parent. Both male and female parents reported the following characteristics being most typical: conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar, had high expectations for students, demonstrated punctuality and good attendance, was enthusiastic about teaching and made teaching fun, was able to manage disruptive behavior, and served as a role model of a successful individual. Findings present important differences in what various gender and racial/ethnic categories of parents expect and deem important in the characteristics of a "best teacher." (Contains 17 references.) (JDD)

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PARENTAL ATTITUDES REGARDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A "BEST TEACHER": COMPARISON BY GENDER AND ETHNIC GROUP

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ABSTRACT

PARENTAL ATTITUDES REGARDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A "BEST TEACHER": COMPARISON BY GENDER AND ETHNIC GROUP

The purpose of this investigation was to survey the parents of public school students regarding the characteristics of a "best teacher." The study was designed to contribute to the professional literature, abundant in its collection of material on university and teacher discernment's of the "best teacher," but deficient in data reporting the perceptions of parents. The authors suggest that the messages parents overtly and covertly communicate to their children regarding school and teachers--and their children's perceptions and interpretations of those messages--influence children's subsequent achievement motivation and have a likely influence on learning. The stereotype of a "good or best" teacher was highly associated with the characteristics of a well-liked teacher, and served as a model for the desirable attributes of a successful teacher.. The survey goroup was limited to parents of elementary students enrolled during the 1993-1994 academic year in the Grand Rapids Public School District. The total number of surveys administered was 510 with a 99% return rate, and approximately 50 percent of the parent responses were from minority parents. The findings presented important differences in what various gender and racial/ethnic categories of parents expect and deem important in the characteristics of a "best teacher." In general, the "best teacher" was identified as a female, representative of the parent's racial/ethic group, teaching at the elementary level.

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Faite R-P. Mack, Ph.D. and Thomas E. Jackson, Ph.D.

Introduction

Very seldom have large-scale surveys been undertaken to obtain information on parents' perceptions of their "best teachers." Contributing to the difficulty of this type of study are two requirements which must be established in the evaluation of a stereotype: (a) the characteristics of the stereotype have to be accepted by a significant number of the population and (b) there has to be some kind of logical association among the characteristics (McLuahn, 1970). As with the stereotype, this pattern would have to be logical in association, but not necessarily representative of everyone in the group (Wright, 1984).

Using the guidelines established by McLuan (1970), as cited in Wright (1984), it was discovered that the term "teacher" and "good teacher" represented strong positive stereotypes, and were inclusive of the characteristics of a "well-liked" teacher. He discovered, as well, that the attributes associated with these terms could be useful in selecting and/or evaluating teachers.

Dabney and Davis (1982) discovered when parents said "the school," most often their point o reference was the teacher(s) of their child or children--teachers past as well as present. They were the reason why parents, without exception, said that they "liked" the school. The major reasons offered to describe a good school included strict discipline, the "back to basics" instructional approach, and the concern of the teachers. The atmosphere in which instruction took place was as much a focus of concern for parents as was the content of instruction:

> "In expressing why she preferred her son's previous teacher to the current (and why she believed her son preferred him, also), one parent said, '...As soon as they walked in the door, he would tell them, "if you're not going to do your work, don't even bother to come in the room...' (p. 133).
>
> Teachers who 'don't take any stuff' are admired. It is assumed that teachers who disciplinary control is lax or ineffective will not be able to be good teachers no matter what their preparation. And teachers are identified along those lines more readily than they are identified according to the scores the children have received on standardized tests. Teachers are remembered, also, historically, according to their talents as disciplinarians. When asked about a teacher who had gone on to become a political figure in the community, a parent answered, 'She was a good teacher.' She didn't take nothing off of you. She would crack your fingers with a ruler in a minute." (p. 133).

Dabney and Davis (1982) also discovered that the teacher is the most direct link to the school for parents. If parents like the teacher(s) their children had at the time of the interview, they were more favorable disposed toward the school than otherwise. Certain teachers' names were mentioned far more frequently than others, and those teachers were among the ones who had taught at the school for twenty years or more. Those few teachers also seemed to carry the weight of much of the image that the school had in the minds of parents. As parents characterized the school, and added to their own experiences with individual teachers, those few senior teachers over the years had impressed themselves and their style upon more individual parents and, in some instances,

grandparents--than others more recently employed. It was significant, also, that those same teachers were the ones most frequently described as "top" by school personnel.

In a previous study of high school student attitudes (Mack and Jackson, 1993), they discovered that a stereotype existed for the characteristics of "teacher"; the term "best teacher" represented a strong positive stereotype, providing the general traits of a well-liked teacher; and the characteristics established for both "teacher" and "best teacher" could be useful in selecting and evaluating new teachers, existing staff, or student teachers. High school students identified the following characteristics as being most typical of their "best" teacher:

1. Was fair when discussing issues of race and ethnicity
2. Communicated effectively with students at their level of learning
3. Had high expectations for all students
4. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
5. Presented the contributions of different racial/ethnic groups in a positive manner.
6. Was objective in teaching male and female students
7. Was concerned about each student as an individual with unique needs and contributions
8. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
9. Demonstrated a sense of humor
10. Was able to manage disruptive behavior

Delgadillo (1991) purports that there is a popular conception that in order to transfer knowledge, the sender must know something about the receiver; in other words, effective instruction requires the teacher to know the student. Indeed the common belief is that the teacher who knows more about the student

and teachers do not talk to each other and what little communication does occur is nominal, lacking the depth required to be of use in enhancing learning. When teachers do know more about particular students, such knowledge comes not from their own inquiries but primarily from parents.

When asked to recall from their own past experience what they had uniquely learned in school (compared to other sources such as home, church, friends), with few exceptions parents recalled positive school learning experiences centering on nonacademics (feelings, of self-confidence, sense of curiosity, organization, neatness, etc.). Without being asked, parents volunteered that the teacher behaviors contributing to the outcomes they recalled included personal interest and encouragement. They wanted their children to be in classrooms of "caring" teachers also (Redfield, 1987).

When asked what educational outcomes they had observed in their children that could be attributed to any particular teacher, parents focused on nonacademics (curiosity, self-confidence, high expectations, punctuality, etc.). Even with probing, only one academic outcome was mentioned (e.g., learning to use the associative property of addition). Only three negative outcomes were elicited and they did not all come from the same interview group. One example was "learning to be different in different teachers' classes." Learning specific academic skills was not volunteered as a valued outcome of schooling. However, parents felt that students' test scores might be one piece of information considered in the evaluation of teachers, but that other outcomes were of equal, if not greater, importance (Redfield, 1987).

In a survey of the Los Angeles Unified School District (1985), 10,500 parents were questioned concerning the district's performance. A majority of the parents were generally satisfied with teachers (76%). Parents showed greatest concern about the ability of the district to prepare students for jobs, and about

the behavior of students (56% acceptable in both cases). While parents were 65% favorable toward the quality of their district's programs, they were 74% favorable toward the quality of their childrens schools.

Papalewis and Brown (1990) indicated that differences in socialization affect the evaluation of instruction. Social class and ethnicity serve as major variables in the formation of teacher expectations. Highly biased individuals are those who are susceptible to stereotypically biasing information which manifests itself into a strong self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ford (1993) found that minority parents continually and consistently communicated the importance of teachers and schooling. Children whose parents were perceived to support their teachers and schools were found to be more optimistic than children whose parents wee not as supportive. Ford concluded that her study confirmed Eccles, Addler, and Meece's (1984) suggestions that students' beliefs and values are related to their academic achievement and their educational plans; or, as Berliner (1989) cogently stated, "environments do not influence motivation in any direct fashion, rather it is the perception of those environments that influences motivation" (p. 318).

Slaughter-Defoe (1991) reported that parental attitudes and involvement in the educational process are crucial components of effective schooling for minority children. She suggested that the parents or parent-surrogates are central to successful student achievement. Regardless of the educational philosophy and school racial composition, so long as there is family commitment to the educational mission of the school, minority children can be successful school achievers.

Both Lindle (1989) and Brandt (1989) reported the importance of assessing parent perspectives and attitudes. It is suggested that we ask parents (or guardians or any custodial adults) to evaluate their experiences with the

schools, and to have them reflect on the worst and the best experiences they have had with any school.

Henderson (1988) reported that when parents show an interest in their children's education and maintain high expectations for their preference, they are promoting attitudes that are critical to achievement attitudes that can be formed independently of social class or other external circumstances. Parent attitudes, whether begun before or after a child starts school, have significant, long lasting effects. If these attitudes and experiences are based on negative educational influences or experiences, they promote the development of attitudes that inhibit achievement in school.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this investigation was to survey the attitudes of elementary school parents regarding their perceptions of the characteristics of their "best" teacher. It was designed to answer the question, "What are the perceived characteristics of the teacher considered to be the "best" according to your previous experience with schooling?"

Sample

The sample was limited to elementary school parents who had students enrolled during the 1993-1994 academic year in forty-five elementary schools within the attendance area of the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Public School District. The total number of surveys administered was 510, and 505 (99%) were returned for data analysis. Parent representation by gender included 73 percent females and 22 percent males, whereas 5 percent did not indicate their gender status. Based on parent self-identification, the ethnic representation of the total survey group was .8 percent Asian-American, 35.6 percent African-American, 43.4 percent European-American, 10.6 percent Hispanic, 2.4 percent Native-American, and 7.3 percent not identified.

Survey Instrument

An two-page, back-to-back questionnaire was developed, having two self-identification demographic questions regarding the respondents, three demographic questions regarding the "best teacher", and 25 questions regarding the characteristics of the "best" teacher using a Likert-type rating scale based on the following format: always, sometimes, rarely, and never. Both English and Spanish language version of the questionnaire were provided.

Survey Process

In cooperation with the Research and Development Office of the Grand Rapids Public Schools, all elementary school principals arranged to schedule parent meeting times for the activity. Parents were told to think of the teacher they considered "best" in their academic careers and to respond to the characteristics offered in the survey. Respondents were informed that the survey was a confidential activity, not a test, and the only "right" answer was the one that was a true reflection of their opinion.

The researcher gave oral directions on how to complete the survey, and provided information to indicate the purpose and use of the responses. In several cases, bilingual translators were provided for parents who were not dominant in the English language. They were informed that the questions would take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and would be administered and collected by one of the researchers.

All completed forms were given to the Research and Development Office for tabulation and analysis. Data was analyzed using the SPSS/PC statistical package.

Grand Rapids (Michigan Public School District)

The Grand Rapids Public School District is the second largest school district in the State of Michigan, with an approximate student enrollment of

30,000. Located in West Michigan, it is best described as a middle-size, urban school district with a growing enrollment of minority pupils. The forty-five elementary schools offer basic and specialty programs for students.

Survey Findings: "Best Teacher" Demographic Characteristics

WHAT IS THEIR GENDER? Response by the total survey group indicated that 59.9% of the "best" teachers were female and 40.5% were male. African-American parents reported: 64.6% female and 35.4% male. Asian-American parents reported: 75% female and 25% female. Hispanic parents reported 64.2% female and 35.8% male. Native American parents reported 63.6% female and 36.4% male. European-American parents reported 54.1% female and 45.9% male.

WHAT IS THEIR RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP? Response by the total group evidenced a rank order of choices: 60.6 European-American, 26.2 African-American, 8.0% Hispanic, 4.1% Asian-American, and 0.4% Native-American. African-American 64.9%, European-American 31.6%, Asian-American 2.9%, and Hispanic 0.6%. Asian-American parents had the following rank order choices: Asian-American 75% and European-American 25%. Hispanic parents offered the following rank order choices: Hispanic-American 61.1%, European-American 27.8%, Asian-American 5.6%, African-American 3.7%, and Native American 1.9%. Native American parents had the following rank order choices: European-American 66.7% and Asian-American 33.3%. European-American parents offered the following rank order choices: European-American 92.2% African-American 3.2%, Asian-American 1.8%, Hispanic 0.9%, and Native American 0.5%.

WHAT LEVEL DID THEY TEACH? Response by the total group identified 45.9% of the "best" teachers were at the elementary level, 37.2% were

at the high school level, and 16.9% were at the middle school level. African-American parents reported the following rank order of choices: elementary level 48.9%, high school level 30.5%, and middle school level 20.7%. Asian-American parents reported the following rank order of choices: elementary level 50% and high school level 50%. Hispanic parents reported the following rank order of choices: elementary level 52.8%, middle school level 24.5%, and high school level 22.6%. Native American parents reported the following rank order of choices: elementary level 58.3%, high school level 33.3%, and middle school level 8.3%. European-American parents reported the following rank order of choices: high school level 45.4%, elementary level 40.8% and middle school level 13.8%.

Survey Findings: Gender Comparisons

The following rank order list reflects the ten highest choices of characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher" by female parents:

1. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
2. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
3. Had high expectations for all students
4. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
5. Enforced a positive discipline code based on clear and fair rules that were established at the beginning of the year
6. Was able to manage disruptive behavior
7. Served as a role model of a successful individual
8. Communicated effectively with students at their rate of learning
9. Was fair when discussing issues of race and ethnicity
10. Encouraged students to develop a sense of pride in their school

For males, the following rank order list reflects the ten highest choices of characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher":

1. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
2. Had high expectations for all students
3. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
4. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
5. Communicated effectively with students at their rate of learning
6. Was concerned about each student as an individual with unique needs and contributions
7. Assigned homework on a regular basis which was designed to help students learn
8. Was able to manage disruptive behavior
9. Served as a role model of a successful individual
10. Treated all students fairly without playing favorites

Survey Findings: Ethnic Group Comparisons

The following rank order list reflects the ten highest choices of characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher" by African-American parents:

1. Had high expectations for all students
2. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
3. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
4. Communicated effectively with students at their rate of learning
5. Enforced a positive discipline code based on clear and fair rules that were established at the beginning of the year
6. Served as role model of a successful individual
7. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
8. Was able to manage disruptive behavior
9. Encouraged students to develop a sense of pride in their school
10. Treated all students fairly without playing favorites

Asian-American parents offered the following rank order choices of the characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher"

1. Had high expectations for all students
2. Assigned homework on a regular basis which was designed to help students learn
3. Treated all students fairly without playing favorites
4. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
5. Accepted constructive criticism in a positive manner
6. Provided parents with directions on how they could help with homework
7. Presented the contributions of different racial/ethnic groups in a positive manner
8. Was objective in teaching male and female students
9. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
10. Was able to manage disruptive behavior

For Hispanic parents, the following rank order list reflects the ten highest choices of characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher'.

1. Had high expectations for all students
2. Encouraged students to develop a sense of pride in their school
3. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
4. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
5. Was available to discuss problems related to issues outside of school
6. Communicated effectively with students at their rate of learning
7. Assigned homework on a regular basis which was designed to help students learn
8. Was fair when discussing issues of race and ethnicity
9. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
10. Was able to manage disruptive behavior

The following rank order list reflects the ten highest choices of characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher" by Native-American parents:

1. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
2. Served as a role model of a successfully individual
3. Encouraged students to develop a sense of pride in their school
4. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
5. Was able to build student self-esteem by using praise while avoiding ridicule and negative criticism
6. Dressed like a professional
7. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
8. Enforced a positive discipline code based on clear and fair rules that were established at the beginning of the year
9. Had high expectations for all students
10. Treated all students fairly without playing favorites

For European-American parents, the following rank order list reflects the ten highest choices of characteristics which could be attributed to the "best teacher":

1. Demonstrated punctuality and good attendance
2. Conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar
3. Was enthusiastic about teaching and made learning fun
4. Had high expectations for all students
5. Communicated effectively with students at their rate of learning
6. Served as a role model of a successful individual
7. Enforced a positive discipline code based on clear and fair rules that were established at the beginning of the year
8. Was fair when discussing issues of race and ethnicity

9. Was concerned about each student as an individual with unique needs and contributions
10. Accepted constructive criticism in a positive manner

Discussion and Summary

What are the perceived characteristics of teachers considered to be the "best" in the academic careers of parents of elementary students? Findings in this study suggested the following conclusions:

1. They were typically female.
2. They were ranked in the following order by ethnic group: European-American, African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, Native-American.
3. Except for Native American parents, they were identified as belonging to the same ethnic/racial group as the parent.
4. They had been experienced at the elementary level.
5. Both male and female parents reported the following characteristics being most typical of a "best" teacher: conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar, had high expectations for students, demonstrated punctuality and good attendance, was enthusiastic about teaching and made teaching fun, was able to manage disruptive behavior, and served as a role model of a successful individual.
6. Female parents differed from male parents in the identification of the following characteristics as being most typical: enforced a positive discipline code based on clear and fair rules that were established at the beginning of the year, was fair in discussing issues of race and ethnicity, and encouraged students to develop a sense of pride in their school.
7. Male parents differed from female parents in the identification of the following characteristics as being most typical: was concerned about each student as an individual with unique needs and contributions,

assigned homework on a regular basis which was designed to help students learn, and treated all students fairly without playing favorites.

8. Across ethnic groups, parents identified the following characteristics as being most typical: demonstrated punctuality and good attendance, conversed without the use of excessive slang or poor grammar, and had high expectations for all students.
9. African-American parents differed from the total group by identifying the following characteristics as being most typical: effectively communicated with students at their own rate of learning, enforced a positive discipline code, served as a role model, was enthusiastic about teaching, was able to manage disruptive behavior, encouraged students to develop a sense of pride, and treated all students fairly without playing favorites.
10. Asian-American parents differed from the total group by identifying the following characteristics as being most typical: assigned homework on a regular basis, treated all students fairly without playing favorites, accepted constructive criticism, provided parents with directions on how they could help with homework, presented contributions of different ethnic/racial groups in a positive manner, was objective in teaching male and female students, and was able to manage disruptive behavior.
11. Hispanic parents differed from the total group by identifying the following characteristics as being most typical: encouraged students to develop a sense of pride, was enthusiastic about teaching, was available to discuss problems related to issues outside of school, effectively communicated with students at their rate of learning, assigned homework on a regular basis, was fair in discussing issues of race and ethnicity, and was able to manage disruptive behavior.

12. Native American parents differed from the total group by identifying the following characteristics as being most typical: served as a role model of a successful individual, encouraged students to develop a sense of pride, was able to build student self-esteem, dressed like a professional, was enthusiastic about teaching, enforced a positive discipline code, and treated all students fairly without playing favorites.
13. European-American parents differed from the total group by identifying the following characteristics as being most typical: was enthusiastic about teaching, effectively communicated with students, served as a role mode of a successful individual, enforced a positive discipline code, was fair when discussing issues of race and ethnicity, was concerned about each student as an individual with unique needs and contributions, and accepted constructive criticism in a positive manner.

The messages parents overtly and covertly communicate to their children regarding school--and children's perceptions and interpretations of those messages--influence children's subsequent achievement motivation and have a likely influence on learning. Wright (1984) stated that teachers should know that when they enter any classroom, they will most likely deal with a stereotypical pattern. The stereotype of a "good or best" teacher is highly associated with the characteristics of a well-liked teacher. Although this stereotype is value laden, it serves as a model for the desirable attributes of a successful teacher.

As Mack and Jackson (1993) reported in a study of high school student perceptions of the characteristics of the "best" teacher, these traits may vary greatly from the qualities deemed important in the training efforts of institutions of higher education. They suggested that too often, service constituents (parents, students, etc.) have been ignored in the determination of the

characteristics of a "best" teacher, and the association these characteristics may have on motivation, learning and cooperation.

Parents, by gender and ethnic group, have unique characteristics that they have deemed typical of a "best" teacher, especially as the field of teacher education must respond to an increasing degree of diversity in their service communities. These findings are useful in providing a guide for new teachers, existing staff, and student teachers seeking to fulfill the stereotype of a "best" teacher. The findings could be utilized in teacher-training or inservice classes, or for the process of selecting and/or evaluating instructional staff.

Additional research is needed to investigate the influence of parental school expectations and attitudes on student achievement, orientation, beliefs, and values. It necessitates an approach that observes parental and child behavior within the environment in which it occurs and analyzes behavior(s) according to the value systems of the family's indigenous culture (Peters, 1988).

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